

Sociology 111L Sociology of the Life Course

Spring 2021 | UC Berkeley

Instructor: Dr. Linus Huang, Continuing Lecturer

Office hours: on Zoom, Tuesdays, 1-3 PM; sign up via bCal

E-mail: lbhuang@berkeley.edu

Final exam: online, Tuesday, May 11 2020, 11:30 AM-2:30 PM

Course Overview

Society is ordered by *age*. Age is not the only ordering dimension of society, but it is a central one. A *life course perspective* represents a sociological way of understanding how age structures society. Our lives progress through a sequence of socially constructed stages—childhood, adolescence, middle adulthood, and later adulthood. A life course perspective is particularly interested in the rules and norms that govern transitions between these stages. How do you know when you have become an “adult” in the U.S.? How is the answer to this question different today than in the mid-20th century? How is it different for affluent vs. impoverished persons? Men vs. women? Immigrants vs. U.S.-born? Blacks vs. Whites? Urban- vs. rural-based adolescents? What does this story look like in the U.S. vs. in other industrialized nations?

And when we finally leave the workforce and transition into retirement, where will our incomes come from when we’re no longer receiving a company paycheck? Where will our medical insurance come from? Should eligibility for federal programs like Social Security and Medicare be based on chronological age alone, or should these benefits be targeted more narrowly at those most in need—perhaps regardless of age altogether? Will entitlement programs like Social Security still be financially solvent in 40 or so years when many of you will be nearing retirement? If not, will you have to work far longer into your older years than the Baby Boomer generation nearing retirement today?

Is old age a time of individual leisure (for those fortunate enough to be able to afford it)? If so, is this because society has largely declined to offer older people a positive, productive role to play? The family is the main institution where people from different generations are socially integrated. But other social institutions—especially school, but to a certain degree the world of work as well—are more *age-segregated*. What might a society look like that is more age-integrated rather than age-segregated? Would such a society be more desirable?

The course will begin with *childhood* and *adolescence*. We will examine how inequality in childhood “accumulates” and gets re-produced in young adulthood, independent of other factors. We will then turn to the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Traditionally, markers such as entering the paid workforce and marriage have signaled the arrival of adulthood. For a variety of reasons, achievement of these milestones are increasingly delayed for adolescents today. Are we remaining adolescents longer than before? Or do we re-define what it means to be an “adult”?

In *middle adulthood*, we build our own families, and enter the workforce and develop our careers. Compared to people in other Western societies, Americans are far more likely to marry, divorce, re-marry, re-divorce, etc.—what sociologist Andrew Cherlin calls “the marriage go-round”. Why is the U.S. unusual in this regard, and what should we do about it? With the rise of

dual-earner households as women are ever more likely to develop their own careers in the paid workforce, how can Americans achieve a balance between work and family?

The majority of the course will focus on our *later adulthood*. We will examine debates surrounding welfare, health care, and inequality, as well as the institution of retirement—all of which are unfolding in the context of scarce public resources that some say have pit older generations against younger ones.

The course will operate at both a macroscopic level and a microscopic level in which we will be encouraged to cultivate what C. Wright Mills calls “the sociological imagination”—understanding how our personal biographies are products of social structure as well as of our individual personalities and circumstances. The course will provide both a foundation for further sociological study of aging but also practical knowledge about the ins and outs of everyday life throughout the duration of the life course.

Logistics for an Online Semester

This course will be entirely online this Spring 2021 semester. Despite this, I intend the course to be given synchronously, as if we were meeting in-person. I will lecture live, over Zoom, on the regular MWF 2:00-3:00 PM schedule. We will observe the “Berkeley time” convention of starting 10 minutes after the hour, so we will actually begin at 2:10 PM on MWF.

Although I don’t recommend it, it will be technically possible to take the course **asynchronously**. All lectures will be recorded and posted to bCourses shortly after class ends, where they will remain until the end of the semester. Attendance/participation will not be part of the grade. Of the graded assignments, only the final exam will require online attendance at a specific time, but even there, accommodations can be made for those in different time zones, etc.

But, while asynchronous participation will technically be possible, I recommend synchronous participation in the course. This course will indeed follow a lecture format, as it would have if we had been holding the course in-person, but the Zoom sessions will not be me just playing a pre-recorded lecture. I intend to take full advantage of Zoom’s interactive features, including both normal audio/visual interaction, as well as chat.

I will hold weekly office hours on Tuesdays from 1:00-3:00 PM. These will be held over Zoom, but at a separate URL from the lecture (the lectures are of course specific to the course, but my office hours are shared between students in all three of my courses this term). Students can sign up for 15-minute appointments over bCal.

Readings

All readings for this course will be made available in PDF format on the bCourses site. There are no textbooks or course readers to purchase.

In many cases reading assignments have been chosen that offer a basic story, but with in-depth details omitted. Lecture time will be used to introduce material that explores the stories in the

readings in greater depth. You will be responsible for both the material in the readings and the material presented in lecture.

Grading

Your grade will be determined by three different components:

- **Three focus papers** (10% each, 30% total), distributed throughout the course, each associated with a specific topic. Each will be either 1- or 2-single-spaced pages, maximum. These are not research papers, but neither are they open-ended response papers: each will have a specific question or issue that the paper should address. Focus papers will be scored by how well they demonstrate serious engagement with the material and how well they address the question asked.
- **Two midterm exams** (25% each, 50% total). Both will be “take-home” (whatever that means during an online semester) in that you will be given 4 days to complete each, rather than a single class session.
- **A final exam** (20%), which will be administered as a bCourses quiz during the University’s official exam timeslot for this course: Tuesday, May 11, 2020, 11:30 AM-2:30 PM. The exam will be 100% multiple choice. It will cover material from the entire course (i.e., it will be cumulative), but it will emphasize material from the later parts of the course.

The course grading scale is as follows:

A+	97+	A	93-96	A-	90-92
B+	87-89	B	83-86	B-	80-82
C+	77-79	C	73-76	C-	70-72
D+	67-69	D	63-66	D-	60-62
		F	0-59		

When it comes time to compute overall course grades, I will round to the nearest whole number using standard rounding conventions—89.49 rounds down to 89, 89.50 rounds up to 90, etc. It doesn’t really matter what the letter grade on the individual assignments are.

There are no other discretionary considerations, nor opportunities to earn extra credit on an individual basis, that will factor into your grade.

There are no surprises in how I calculate course grades. The GRADES section on bCourses will incorporate the weightings above and will accurately keep you apprised of your course progress. During the semester, with a little arithmetic, you can figure out how you need to do on subsequent assignments in order to earn a particular grade.

Late grade policy: Work submitted late will be marked down 20% for each 24-hour period the assignment is overdue.

Disabled Students Program (DSP)

DSP students should have their arrangements made by the third week of instruction. The DSP office will automatically send me a digital copy of your letter, with explanation of your accommodations. It will not be necessary to also provide me with a physical copy of the letter.

Recommendation Letters

Writing recommendation letters is part of an instructor's job and one which I embrace readily. However, it is difficult for me, and unhelpful to all parties involved, to write letters for students I do not know very well. I can and have exercised the discretion to decline to write letters when I don't know students beyond what grades they've earned in the course. If you anticipate asking me to write a letter, it is in your interest to participate in class discussion, visit me during my office hours, etc., and let me know what your plans and interests are above and beyond course material.

Academic Honesty & Classroom Conduct

The UC Berkeley Honor Code states that "As a member of the UC Berkeley community, I act with honesty, integrity, and respect for others" (<https://teaching.berkeley.edu/berkeley-honor-code>). I expect you will follow these principles. You may not copy specific text or ideas from others, whether from fellow students, from authors of our readings or other material you find, without specific attribution. To do otherwise is to plagiarize. You may not cheat on any of the exams by bringing in illicit outside material, copying from fellow students, or engaging in other dishonest practices. Violation of these rules will result in an immediate **-0-** on the assignment in question, plus a report to the Office of Academic Affairs at my discretion.

You may of course discuss the lectures and readings with your fellow students. Forming studying groups on your own is encouraged, especially as there are no discussion sections to accompany this course. If these groups are used to struggle through ideas or debate topics (both are also good uses of class time, by the way!), then the effort expended can be very rewarding. However, if groups are used simply to memorize a classmate's notes by rote, to subsequently recite on exams, **this is effectively another form of plagiarism** as far as I am concerned. I use this specific example because it has popped up in my courses before.

Study group meetings should be suspended during periods where a take-home exam is active. They can begin again after the exam due date has been reached.

Additional Resources

The University has set up a central online location with links to a variety of resources, both academic and non-academic, that students might need. Go here: One-Click Resources for Undergraduate Resources <https://recalibrate.berkeley.edu/one-click-mode/one-click-resources-undergraduate-students>.

Reading, Assignment, and Exam Schedule

All readings listed below are required and should be completed prior to the first meeting of the indicated week.

Week 1 (Jan 20-22) | Introduction: what is a sociology of the life course?

No readings.

Part I: Childhood and Adolescence

Week 2 (Jan 25-29) | What does childhood mean to society?

Reading: Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*

Week 3 (Feb 1-5) | How does what happens during childhood affect the transition to adulthood?

Reading: Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life (Second Edition)*

Focus Paper #1 due Friday, February 5, 2020

Week 4 (Feb 8-12) | What pathways do young people take to adulthood?

Readings:

- Frank Furstenberg Jr & Sheela Kennedy (2016), “Growing Up Is Harder to Do.2: After the Great Recession”
 - Linda Borgen & Rubén G. Rumbaut, “Coming of Age in ‘America’s Finest City’”
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Part II: Middle Adulthood

Week 5 (Feb 17-19) | How do we get from college to a job?

Note: Monday, February 15th 2020 is President’s Day (no class).

Reading: Richard Arum & Josipa Roksa, *Aspiring Adults Adrift*

Midterm Exam #1 distributed Friday, February 19, 2020

Week 6 (Feb 22-26) | Does the institution of marriage need saving?

Midterm Exam #1 due Tuesday, February 23, 2020

Readings:

- Laurie Shrage, “The End of ‘Marriage’” *The New York Times* Nov 4 2012
 - Richard V. Reeves, “How to Save Marriage in America” *Brookings* Feb 13 2014
 - Andrew Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round* chapters 1 & 8
 - David Brooks, “The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake” *The Atlantic* Mar 2020
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Week 7 (Mar 1-5) | How will you balance work and family?

Readings:

- Lara Bazelon, “Opinion: I’ve Picked My Job Over My Kids” *The New York Times* Jun 29 2019
 - Claire Cain Miller, “Women Did Everything Right. Then Work Got ‘Greedy’” *The New York Times* Apr 26 2019
 - Claire Cain Miller, “Why Mothers’ Choices About Work and Family Often Feel Like No Choice at All” *The New York Times* Jan 17 2020
 - Olga Khazan, “Give Up on Work-Life Balance” *The Atlantic* May 30 2019
 - Rebecca Rosen, “How Can the U.S. Make Life Less Draining for Workers?” *The Atlantic* Mar 23 2016
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Part III: Later Adulthood

Week 8 (Mar 8-12) | Does old age have meaning?

Readings:

- Ceridwen Dovey, “What Old Age Is Really Like” *The New Yorker* Oct 1 2015
 - Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (1972)
 - John Rowe & Robert Kahn, eds, *Successful Aging* (1998)
 - Erik Erikson, Joan M. Erikson & Helen Q. Kivnick, *Vital Involvement in Old Age: The Experience of Old Age in Our Time* (1986)
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Week 9 (Mar 15-19) | How do we achieve a happy retirement?

Focus Paper #2 due Monday, March 15, 2020

Readings:

- Economic Policy Institute, “The State of American Retirement Savings” (2019)
 - Corey Abramson, “Game-Day Strategies” (2015)
 - Ronald J. Manheimer, “Ten Keys to a Creative Retirement” (2017)
 - Arthur C. Brooks, “Why So Many People Are Unhappy in Retirement” *The Atlantic* May 7 2020
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March 22-26 Spring Break!

Week 10 (Mar 29-Apr 2) | Should families provide for their own?

Readings:

- Peter J. Strauss & Nancy M. Lederman, “Medicaid and Long-Term Care” from *The Elder Law Handbook: A Legal and Financial Survival Guide for Caregivers and Seniors* (1996)
- Jane Bryant Quinn, “Shame of the Rich: Making Themselves Poor” *The Washington Post* June 3 2001
- Stephen Moses, “Aging America’s Achilles’ Heel: Medicaid Long-Term Care” Policy Analysis No. 549, Cato Institute, Washington DC Sep 1 2015
- C. Jean Blaser, “The Case Against Paying Family Caregivers: Ethical and Practical Issues” *Generations* Fall, 1998, 22:3 pp 65-69
- Suzanne R. Kunkel, Robert A. Applebaum & Ian M. Nelson, “For Love and Money: Paying Family Caregivers” *Generations* Winter, 2003-2004, 27:4 pp. 74-80

Midterm Exam #2 distributed Friday, April 2, 2020

Week 11 (Apr 5-9) | Should we ration health care for older people?

Midterm Exam #2 due Tuesday, April 6, 2020

Readings:

- Daniel Callahan, “Why We Must Set Limits” in P. Homer & M. Holstein, eds, *A Good Old Age? The Paradox of Setting Limits* (1990)
 - Ezekiel J. Emanuel, “Why I Hope to Die at 75” *The Atlantic* Oct 2014
 - Peter Ubel, *Pricing Life: Why It’s Time for Health Care Rationing* (2000) pp. xvi-xix
 - Nat Hentoff, “The Pied Piper Returns for the Old Folks” *The Village Voice* Apr 26 1988
 - Howard Brody, “From an Ethics of Rationing to an Ethics of Waste Avoidance” *New England Journal of Medicine* 366: 1949-1951 (2012)
 - Daniel Perry & Robert Butler, “Aim Not Just for Longer Life, but Expanded ‘Health Span’” *The Washington Post* Dec 20 1988
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Week 12 (Apr 12-16) | How should people near the end of life be cared for?

Readings:

- Robert A. Pearlman & Helene Starks, “Why Do People Seek Physician-Assisted Death?” (2004)
 - Charles F. McKhann, *A Time to Die: The Place for Physician Assistance* excerpt (1999)
 - Leon Kass, “Neither for Love nor Money: Why Doctors Must Not Kill” *The Public Interest* 94 (1989)
 - Roi Livne, “The New Economy of Dying” (2019)
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Week 13 (Apr 19-23) | Should age or need be the basis of entitlement?

Focus Paper #3 due Monday, April 12, 2020

Readings:

- Lester Thurow, *The Future of Capitalism* excerpts (1996)
 - Gary Burtless, “A Generational War Over the Budget? It’s Hard to See It In the Numbers” *Brookings* Dec 2 2015
 - Astra Taylor, “Opinion: Out With the Old, In With the Young” *The New York Times* Oct 18 2019 (interactive feature online: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/18/opinion/old-age-president-2020.html>)
 - John B. Williamson, Diane M. Watts-Ray & Eric R. Kingson, “Introduction” from *The Generational Equity Debate* (1999)
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Week 14 (Apr 26-30) | What is the future of Social Security?

Readings:

- Peter A. Diamond & Peter R. Orszag, *Saving Social Security: A Balanced Approach*. Brookings (2004)
 - Ramesh Ponnuru, “The Necessity and Desirability of Social Security Reform” *National Review* (2016)
 - Lawrence H. Thompson, “Social Security Reform and Benefit Adequacy” from *The Retirement Project*, Brief Series, No. 17, March 2004, pp. 1-7
 - C. Eugene Steuerle & Melissa Favreault, “Social Security for Yesterday’s Family?” *Straight Talk on Social Security and Retirement Policy* No. 35
 - AARP, “The Future of Social Security: 12 Proposals You Should Know About”
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May 3-7 Reading, Recitation and Review

Final Exam online Tuesday, May 11th, 2020 11:30 AM-2:30 PM